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Where to Begin: Five (Or More) Books about Daoism

November 8, 2010 in [Books](#), [Where to Begin](#) by [The China Beat](#) | [Permalink](#)

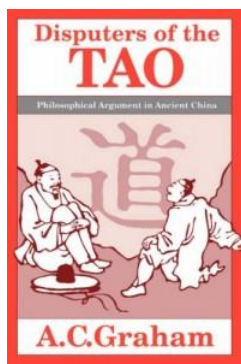
By Ian Johnson

With all the attention to Confucius and Confucianism, it is easy to forget how important other philosophical and religious traditions have been in shaping China's past and influencing its present. Ian Johnson helps rectify this imbalance of coverage with "The Rise of the Tao," a long essay in the latest issue of the New York Times Sunday Magazine that highlights the significance of the Daoist revival and introduces readers to an abbess who is part of this resurgence of belief. As the very first journalist China Beat [ever interviewed](#) for the site (and someone who took part in a China Beat-sponsored dialogue at UC Irvine on covering the PRC and Germany during a tour to promote his latest book, [A Mosque in Munich](#)), we turn to him now for suggestions of five things he's read—by academic or non-academic authors—that have helped him think about Daoism:

There's been an explosion of Daoist studies in recent years as we realize how China's only (if you exclude Confucianism) indigenous religion underpins so much of the culture and politics of the past 2,000 years.

The problem in this field, as in many others, is there's been the usual deep specialization but not too many efforts to synthesize and make the fruits of academic research available to a wide public. This is compounded by the fact that many academics use different terminology for the same phenomena—if they can't agree on the terms, how can outsiders understand it? Thus people talk about "popular religion," "folk religion" or "common religion" for the broad swath of beliefs that form the Massif Central of Chinese religion, out of which Daoism, Buddhism and other systems arose. But which term is better? No one can agree. Maybe this is normal for a still-young field but it's sometimes frustrating.

But don't be discouraged, arguments are the spice of (academic) life and the field has produced many interesting books. Before I offer them, let me dispense with two really obvious kinds of books: the key philosophical works and the one-volume intros.



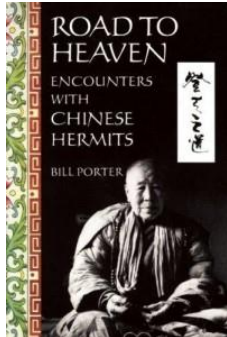
Everyone knows about the *Daodejing* and the *Zhuangzi*, so I'll let you explore which version of these texts you prefer. [Burton Watson](#) does a great version of each and Red Pine (more on him below) does a super version of the [DDJ](#). If you want more on the basic philosophy, the slam dunk must-read is *Disputers of the Tao* by A.C. Graham, one of the finest works on ancient Chinese philosophy.

I'm also going to get this list down to five books by forgoing one-volume intros. These are invaluable but are a bit too easy to include. The two best ones here are *Daoism and Chinese Culture* by Livia Kohn, the grande dame of Daoist studies, and James Miller's *Daoism: A Beginner's Guide* (aka *Daoism: A Short Introduction*). Both books give reliable overviews from early philosophy to the development of organized religion and modern practices.

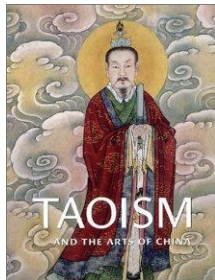
Finally, a note on spelling. In my *New York Times* article, the copy editors insisted on using "Taoist," figuring it is a loan word that has already been anglicized. And in fact many of the books listed below use "Taoist" or "Taoism" because publishers think that most readers still recognize this. But an

increasing number of people use the more pinyin-conform “Daoist.” I’ve decided personally to go with “Daoist” but use whichever you like best.

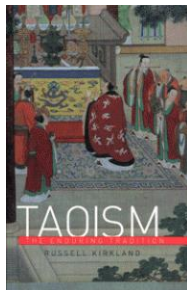
With these fiddly comments out of the way, here’s my list:



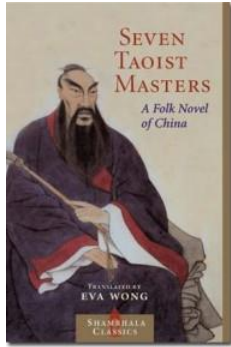
1) *Road to Heaven: Encounters with Chinese Hermits* by Bill Porter, aka Red Pine. This funny and lively book by the eminent translator is an eye-opener because he finds real hermits living in China’s mountains and also conveys the ideas that inspires them. Some of the hermits are Buddhists but this is a bonus because we learn how close the two religions are when practiced by real masters.



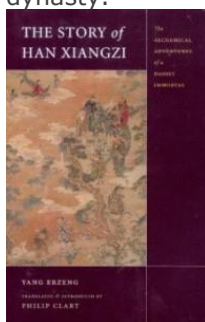
2) *Taoism and the Arts of China* by Stephen Little. This accompanied a path-breaking exhibition on Daoist art curated by Professor Little, which makes clear the huge influence Daoism has on the arts. The book is beautifully illustrated and really one-of-a-kind. Unfortunately it is out of print and rather pricey but most libraries should have it.



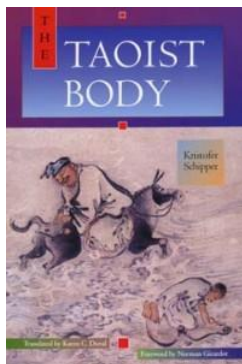
3) *Taoism: The Enduring Tradition* by Russell Kirkland. This slim volume by a veteran historian of Daoism grapples with many key questions that ordinary readers or students of Chinese religions will have, such as if it’s valid to speak of a difference between “religious Daoism” and “philosophical Daoism.” At times he delves perhaps a bit too deeply into the historiographical battles in the field but like Paul Cohen’s *Discovering History in China*, Kirkland provides an engaging and illuminating discussion of the field and its arguments.



4) *Seven Taoist Masters: A Folk Novel of China* by Eva Wong. My academic friends will rip me for including a book published by Shambhala and this has the publisher's usual disregard for basic sourcing (like which version of the novel is Wong using?) but it's a really good read and gives a lot of basic information on how one of Daoism's two main sects, Quanzhen, was formed in the Yuan dynasty.



4a) I said I'd get this down to five and I will by including this novel as a (more serious) alternative: *The Story of Han Xiangzi: The Alchemical Adventures of a Daoist Immortal* by Yang Erzeng, translated by Philip Clart. This is the story of one of the Eight Immortals, Han Xiangzi, a historical figure who became deified. Unlike Wong's book, it's state of the art and has a very useful introduction. The novel is longer and not as catchy as *Seven Taoist Masters* but is much truer to the original, containing poems, digressions, multiple narrator viewpoints and so on. It also serves another function by showing how many Ming-era novels have not been translated into English.



5) *The Taoist Body* by Kristofer Schipper. An ordained priest and patriarch of modern Daoist studies, Schipper's book reflects his fieldwork in 1970s Taiwan and shows how Daoism is intertwined with local society, with priests performing rituals to help people through good and bad times. His description of a ritual—creating a space in heaven in front of the temple, summoning the gods—is excellent. This book is probably guilty of overgeneralizing about one form of Daoism but if you want to understand the religion at its grassroots level, it's great.

Finally, as my final cop-out, let me relegate this to a post-script: For fun, I'd suggest borrowing from the library *The Taoist Canon: A Historical Companion to the Daozang*, edited by Kristofer Schipper and Franciscus Verellen. This is a three-volume set that gives a short synopsis of each of the 1,500 texts that make up the Daoist Canon, or Daozang, a Ming-era compendium of Daoist texts. It is a towering

work of academic achievement, taking 30 years to complete and involving dozens of scholars in numerous countries. It makes it possible for the first time to get a sense of just how rich Daoist religious practice really is. The book is also a real pleasure to flip through, illustrated with fascinating prints and drawings. You'll find all kinds of works, from alchemy and meditation, to medicine and ritual, all clearly explained by leading scholars. Obviously this is meant as a reference tool but like the OED, it's easy to lose oneself in this rich, esoteric landscape.

Tags: [Daoism](#), [Ian Johnson](#)